

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Two

Who Is Mark?

John, surnamed Mark, was the son of (yet another) Mary, in whose home some believers met to pray for Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:12 - *When this had dawned on him, Peter went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying*). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas in their apostolic journeys when these two traveled together (Acts 12:25 - *When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark*. 13:5 - *When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper*). And when afterwards a dispute about Mark caused a separation between them, Mark accompanied his uncle Barnabas, and Silas went with Paul (Acts 15:36-39 - *Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."* 37 *Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus*).

When he was reconciled to Paul, we find Paul again employing Mark's assistance, recommending him and giving him a very honorable testimony (Colossians 4:10 - *My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him; Philemon 1:23-24 - Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers*). At the end of his life, Paul asked Timothy to bring Mark to Rome so that he could assist Paul there in prison (2 Timothy 4:11 - *Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry*).

Around the same time, Peter said that one called Mark was with him in Babylon (Rome). Peter called this Mark his son—i.e., his spiritual child through conversion (1 Peter 5:13 - *She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark*). Was this Mark the same Mark that helped Paul? Most scholars assume him to be the same Mark because there is no

historical evidence that indicates there was any other Mark of note in the days of the early church.

Authorship

The majority of Biblical commentators agree that the writer of the Gospel of Mark is in fact “John, whose surname was Mark,” who mainly worked with Paul and also was with Peter, heard his preaching in Rome, interpreted Peter’s words, and wrote a gospel primarily based on Peter’s testimony.

Papias (c. 60–c. 130, a disciple of the apostle John) said that John made this comment about Peter’s relationship to Mark’s Gospel: *The elder said this also: Mark, who became Peter’s interpreter, wrote accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord* (Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.15). Irenaeus said nearly the same: *“Matthew published a Gospel while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church at Rome; and after their departure (or decease), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also gave forth to us in writing the things which were preached by Peter”* (Against Heresies, 3.1, written around 180 AD). And Clement of Alexandria (150-211 AD) is still more specific, in a passage preserved to us by Eusebius: *The gospel according to Mark came about in this way: When Peter had publicly proclaimed the word & by the Spirit preached the gospel at Rome, those who were present, being many, urged Mark---as one of his [Peter's] long-time followers who remembered what was said---to make a record of what had been spoken. And he did this and distributed the gospel among those who had asked him. And when this matter came to Peter's attention, he neither strongly forbid it, nor urged it on* (Ecclesiastical History, 6.14).

Eusebius’ own testimony, however, from other accounts, is a bit different: that Peter’s hearers were so penetrated by his preaching that they gave Mark, as being a follower of Peter, no rest until he consented to write his Gospel, as a memorial of Peter’s oral teaching; and *“that the apostle, when he knew by the revelation of the Spirit what had been done, was delighted with the zeal of these men, and sanctioned the reading of the writing (that is, of the Gospel of Mark) in the churches”* (Ecclesiastical History, 2.15).

The Gospel of Mark, then, is really the Gospel of Peter, as collected and transcribed by his secretary Mark. The most likely timeline is as follows:

Peter, 20 years after the Resurrection (mid 50s AD), eventually ended up in Rome, where he spread the faith as a Missionary to the Gentiles. Eventually, he acquired an administrative assistant whom he knew from the old days in Jerusalem, a young man named John Mark, whose mother’s house had been the site of one of the early churches. Mark had worked with Paul until a falling out between them, and

after assisting his Uncle Barnabas, he settled in Rome with Peter, and becomes to the old fisherman like a son. He also becomes an amanuensis, a personal secretary, recording Peter's personal thoughts and recollections and stories, which are eventually organised into what we know as The Gospel of Mark. Additionally, if the ancient sources are correct, Peter both approved of and perhaps even reviewed the Gospel itself, which should more accurately be entitled, "The Gospel of Peter, as written by Mark."

So it shouldn't surprise us that Peter appears on every page, because it is Peter who is telling the story, as he saw it, as he was there. It is the story of Jesus from Peter's point of view. But Mark himself may actually make a brief appearance! During the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane, Mark records the following (Mark 14:51-52): "*One young man following behind was clothed only in a long linen shirt. When the mob tried to grab him, he slipped out of his shirt and ran away naked.*" Many believe this odd inclusion to be a personal note from Mark himself.

Mark's Audience

We are fairly certain that Mark wrote this Gospel in Rome for Gentile (specifically Roman) Christians. Because he wrote to a Gentile audience, Mark:

Explained Jewish customs

- 7:3-4 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)
- 14:12 On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb...
- 15:42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath).

translated several Aramaic expressions

- 5:41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!").
- 7:11 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—
- 7:34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!").
- 15:22 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull").
- 15:34 at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

used several Latin terms

- 5:9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.”
- 15:16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

told time according to the Roman way

- 6:48 (ASV) And seeing them distressed in rowing, for the wind was contrary unto them, about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking on the sea; and he would have passed by them:
- 13:35 Watch therefore: for ye know not when the lord of the house cometh, whether at even, or at midnight, or at cockcrowing, or in the morning;

and, at the climax of the Gospel, recorded the faith of a Roman centurion (standing by the cross) in Jesus’ death

- 15:39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

Mark used the life and works of Jesus to present Christ as the dynamic model of Christian life and service—especially in the face of intense opposition. At the time this Gospel was written (late 50s), the Christians at Rome were living under the reign of Nero (54-68), the first and probably severest persecutor of the church. Many of these Christians would die for their faith. This Gospel would have greatly encouraged the Roman believers because they would have seen in Mark’s narrative how Jesus persevered in the face of constant opposition.

Chapter 13, which contains the only long speech by Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, warns of the desperate troubles soon to come. Christians living through those terrors (the Nero persecution, the Rebellion, the Roman invasion, the Destruction of the Temple) would have cherished Mark as a comfort in those days.

16 Chapters

Mark begins abruptly and ends even more abruptly. It is also short, at only 16 chapters – the Gospel can be easily read in 20 minutes or so. The brevity and the 16 chapters are not coincidental – they could have been recorded and copied in a three-fold Codex, an inexpensive and easily carried (and concealed document). Dissatisfied, early scribes often appended longer endings to the Gospel, but the earliest manuscripts do not include them. Most Bibles include these longer endings as footnotes.